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How do policy-makers learn? The role of international tests and the 'meeting'

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This Briefing examines the development and effects of international comparative testing in the field of education governance in Europe. It uses the examples of international comparative studies of adult literacy to cast light on the nature and direction of policy learning between international organisations, to demonstrate how policy makers learn and to illustrate how international organisations create the necessary consensus and evidence to justify education reform.

- ▶ Although there has been a significant amount of scholarly work on policy transfer from the international to the national level, little research has focused on the processes of policy exchange and cooperation between and across international organisations.
- ▶ The education policies of the EU and OECD have tended to converge in recent years raising questions about how international organisations develop their policies and learn from each other.
- ▶ International comparative testing offers a fruitful area for the study of policy exchange and cooperation: the development of the International Adult Literacy Survey and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey demonstrates how policy consensus in the field of adult literacy was achieved and the ways in which international organisations create the necessary evidence to justify education reform.
- ▶ How do policy makers really learn? This *Briefing* highlights the ways that the sheer number and frequency of meetings becomes a very significant instrument for the establishment of common understandings and language, which very often leads to consensus.
- ▶ International comparative tests promote policy learning as they offer the necessary platforms for achieving policy understanding, the movement and translation of policy and, often, its adoption in education governance in Europe today.

Introduction

Research has so far focused on the top-down transfer of education policy from the international to the national with little attention given to education policy making across and amongst international organisations, especially within Europe. Current research suggests that education policies by the European Commission (EC) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) are received at the national level as relatively homogenous, and this prompts questions about the relationship between the two organisations in terms of policy direction over recent years, and especially since the Lisbon Agreement in 2000 that sought to transform the EU into the most competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy in the world. Thus, this Briefing focuses on an enquiry into the nature and direction of policy learning between international organisations, through the examination of international comparative studies as tools in governing education in Europe (Grek 2010).

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)

IALS was one of the largest international comparative studies conducted in the 1990s. Having started as a nine-country initiative in 1994 it grew, by the end of its run, to the impressive number of 23 participating countries. It was the first time that such a study established a cycle of data collection, involving three rounds of testing, thereby managing to get more support and momentum as it went on, as well as improving its tools and techniques. The study was led by the OECD, in collaboration with the European Union and UNESCO, and administered by Statistics Canada, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and the National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES) – all North American agencies.

IALS examined literacy ‘as a particular capacity and mode of behaviour’ and assessed performance levels ‘along a continuum’ (OECD 2000: iii). Individuals from age 16 to 65 took part in the study, with nationally representative samples, in order to ‘provide insights for policy makers responsible for the design of lifelong learning, and social and labour market policies’ (OECD 2000: xiii). In other words, high levels of

literacy were presented as the essential ingredient of a flourishing society, without which, according to the study, ‘globalisation, technological change and organisational development’ (OECD 2000: xiii) – the challenges of the twenty-first century – could not be met.

IALS managed to skilfully connect literacy (and thus the findings of the study) with a range of other outcomes, such as social capital, community engagement, voluntary participation, social cohesion, political participation of women, better health and wider social benefits. Through the masterly build-up of such a discourse, IALS – again, for the first time – was transcending the boundaries of education research, as it claimed to show the ‘complex relationships between human capital, economic outcomes and social benefits’ (OECD 2000: 84). Thus, with literacy being turned into not only the indispensable element of workplace learning, but almost the indispensable element of living, IALS was slowly managing to shift education policy into the foreground of the governance of high-achieving, well-to-do societies in Europe and beyond.

Further, the IALS design was as a combination of tools of educational assessment with the application of household survey techniques. Above all, IALS established ‘a new standard for providing a theoretical basis for its measurement framework’ (OECD 2000: 87-88) – hence, a new logic. It also followed ‘an advanced psychometric approach’, moving the focus to psychometric testing, and thus opening up the field to significant commercial interests. Finally, claiming to have achieved ‘unprecedented levels of reliability in scoring open-ended items across cultures and languages’, the study promoted the decontextualisation of literacy (OECD 2000: 87-88).

IALS, despite it being the debut OECD international study, did not lack the ‘spectacle’ that similar studies, like PISA, were to create a few years later. In fact, it offered a dramatic premiere, one that made it widely known even to those not involved. The protagonist this time was France, which withdrew its results and the

country's participation from the first round when the study's findings suggested that three quarters of the French population had an ability level in terms of 'literacy' which prevented them from handling the normal matters of everyday life, like reading a newspaper, writing a letter or understanding a short text.

To conclude, IALS created fertile ground for the OECD to push its education policy agenda through measurement and comparison. It heralded a new era in the construction and evolution of international comparative studies, since for the first time it became instrumental not only in linking research, assessment and public policy, but crucially established (i) a common language for the participant countries, research agencies, other IOs and, ultimately, the public; (ii) the creation of a consensus of all those involved on priorities and necessary policy directions; and (iii) it created evidence on the basis of which education reform could be justified. Finally, the study did what all such studies always do – it generated the appetite for the design and delivery of yet another study of its kind. That was the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL).

The Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL)

The first meeting to consider the possibility of mounting the successor to the IALS study, the Adult Literacy and Life Skills survey, took place on European ground, hosted by the Swedish Educational Authority. It was decided to build on IALS in order to create a survey that would look at foundational skills, such as prose literacy, document literacy, numeracy and problem solving, as well as familiarity with and use of information and communication technologies. There was a decision to organise a second meeting of the group, at the University of Amsterdam, in order to discuss the possibility of such a study. However, the operational implications of fielding a computer-based assessment were insurmountable at the time. A third meeting, closer to the study's home this time at the NCER's headquarters in Washington DC, concluded that the test would be undertaken using the humble paper and pencil and that the sample would be drawn from households rather than the workplace.

As a result of the meetings, a Project Advisory Group (PAG) was formed in order to work further in refining the transnational comparability of the measures for numeracy, problem-solving, teamwork and practical cognition. Two subsequent meetings of the international study team were hosted by the US National Center for Education Statistics in Washington in 1998, in order to work on more accurate measures for problem-solving, teamwork and computer literacy, resulting in new development teams being recruited and funded by Statistics Canada, NCES and the Governments of Sweden and Luxembourg. Additional meetings were held in the US: finally, a separate international team developed the background questionnaire for the study.

The sheer number of meetings organised merely to initiate the workings of these groups of experts is such that, analytically, one cannot but underline the significance and impact of meetings in the transfer of ideas at a global level. It was not simply necessity that pushed their organisation, instead, meetings became a significant means of pushing the agenda forward, as:

'Success in this complex field depends not only on theoretical and empirical work, but also on a constant dialogue and exchange among the various specialists and stakeholders to assure that an iterative process takes place'. (Murray, Owen and McGaw 2005: 33)

In the end, six countries – Bermuda, Canada, Italy, Norway, Switzerland and the United States – participated in the first round of ALL data collection, fielding the ALL pilot study in 2002 and the main data collection in 2003 (Murray, Owen and McGaw 2005).

Discussion

This *Briefing* has aimed to examine the policy learning that occurs amongst actors during the conception and organisation of the literacy studies prior to their actual delivery – thus, it tries to move the discussion from the national to the transnational level, where national actors

are still the dominant players, but to a large degree liberated from national constraints and pressures. There is a great deal of scholarly work on policy learning but little has been written on the actual workings of such processes – how policy makers learn, what, when and where. I tried to highlight the ways that such studies apply specific discourses and techniques to create interest around an innovative idea which will distinguish them from other research agencies (with whom, of course, they compete for funds from national governments), so that they can then push specific policy orientations forward. Learning by meeting has emerged as by far the most significant instrument in their efforts to create consensus around measurement goals. Indeed, many of the actors concerned – mainly national official statisticians, subject experts and policy makers – would suggest that they are learning from one another. But how? We trust to learn from friends, rather than strangers, especially when these friends provide us with the information we need. Friends are those that understand our situation and the values which inform our choices (Freeman 2008); they help us deliberate and offer persuasive arguments to be used in more hostile contexts – for example, when resistance is experienced at home (the level of the national).

Freeman gives a very interesting account of how cross-national meetings work, firstly in terms of ‘status levelling’ (‘a temporary parity among participants who are equal at least in their status as invitees’); secondly, in relation to their situation, as participants usually find themselves away from home, at a place where they lose their ordinary sense of time and space; and thirdly, the fact that meetings are also a social situation where dialogue over food and drink are common and for the majority of the participants the time when the ‘real’ talk takes place (Freeman 2008). Finally, Freeman discusses the role of language

for meetings. This is usually English – but a particular English, one that native English speakers also recognise as a special kind of language, one used by ‘Europeans’.

Therefore, policy learning can be characterised as one of the prime instruments in the exchange of knowledge in education in Europe today, as it creates the necessary preconditions for achieving policy understanding, travel, translation and thus, despite local idiosyncrasies and histories, policy consensus.

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